



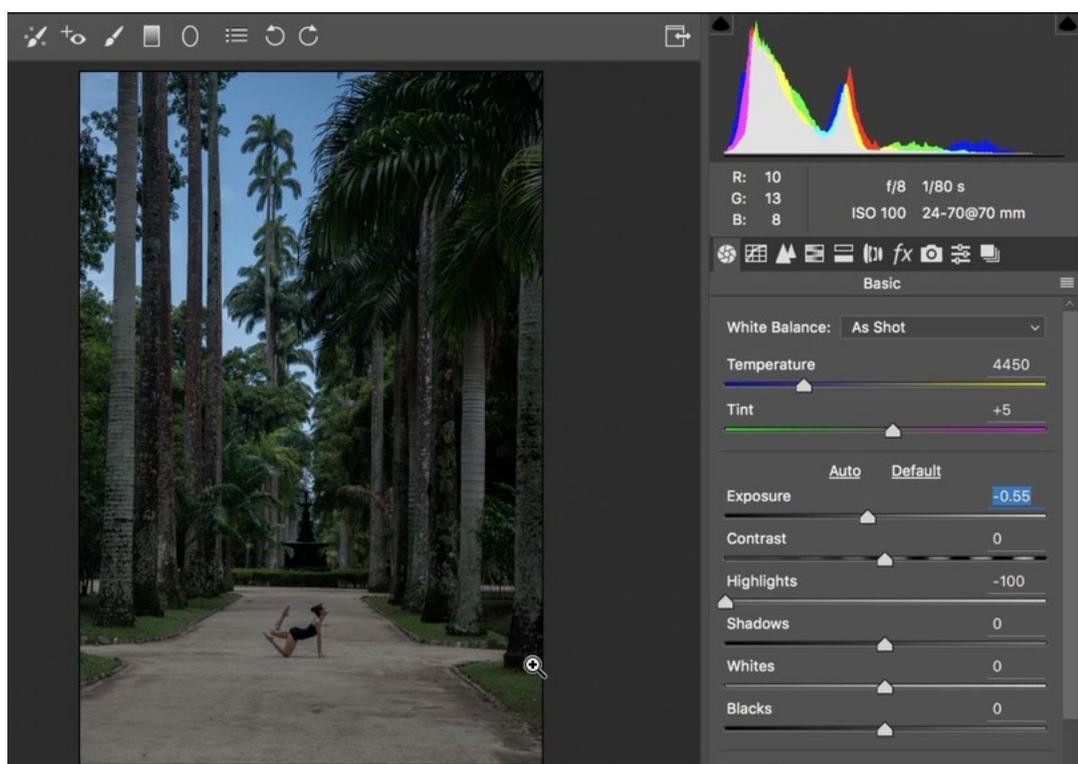
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Complex Masking Tips

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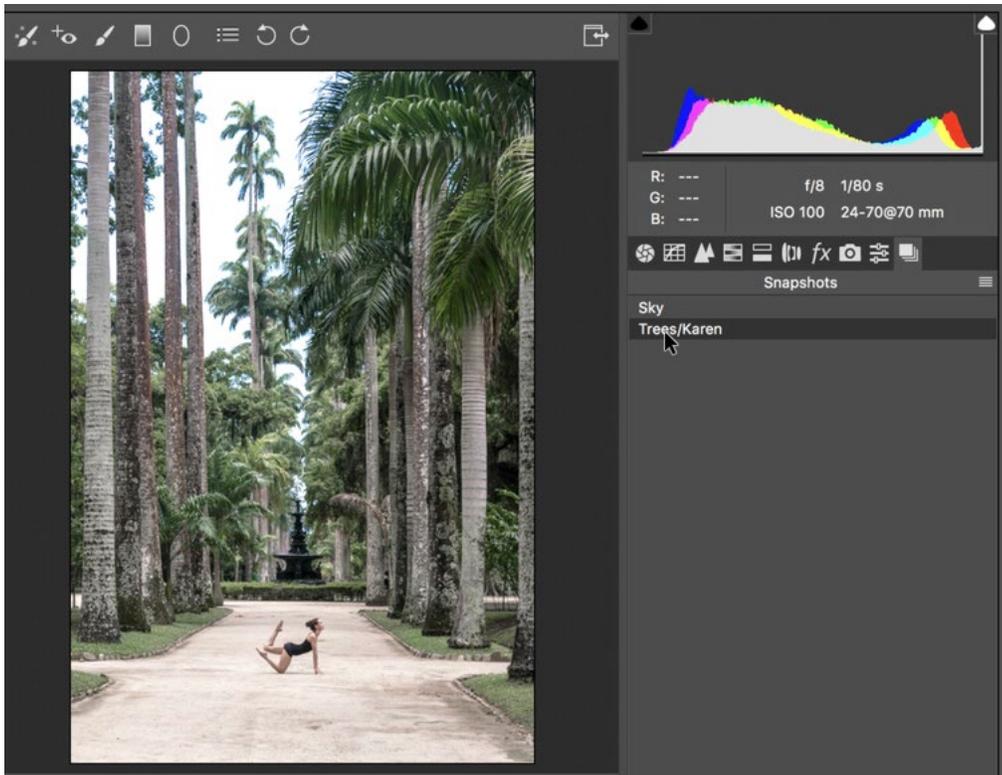
In this lesson, we're going to process a raw file more than once, focusing on how to do some complex masking. The example image was captured in a single exposure and then processed twice: once for the sky and once for the foreground. It was crucial that I shot in the raw format here because I had to make the sky very bright and then bring the detail back in Adobe Camera Raw (ACR).

Two Rounds of Processing During the first round of processing in ACR, we'll focus on making the sky look good. To do that, we'll bring the Highlights slider all the way down and then lower the Exposure slider until the sky looks dark enough.



The first time we processed the image, we did so to make the sky look optimal. This involved moving the Highlights slider all the way down and the Exposure slider down a bit as well.

Transform Tool Tip: In this image, there was some slight distortion because I had to tilt the camera up in order to capture the treetops. To correct for this, I used the Transform Tool, which can be found in the tool bar at the top of the ACR interface. When activated, drag out lines on objects in your image that should be perfectly horizontal or vertical. Once at least two lines have been dragged out, ACR will correct the distortion. I dragged out two lines on tree trunks that were leaning in the frame in order to make them vertical again.



We processed the image a second time, to optimize the foreground (the trees and Karen), and then created a second Snapshot inside the Snapshots panel in ACR.

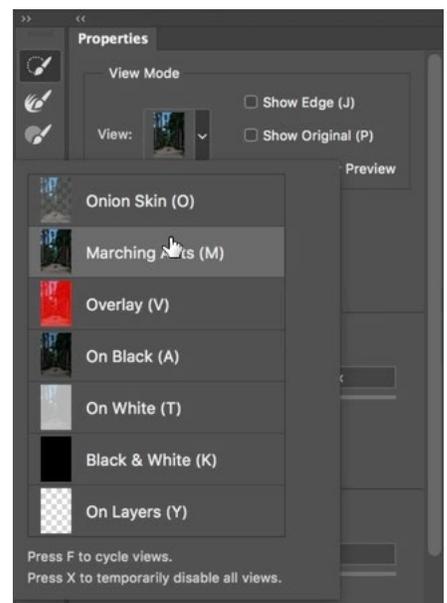
After processing the image for the sky, we'll create a new Snapshot of the image, which will save all of the adjustment settings that were applied. To create a Snapshot in ACR, click on the tab on the far right side of the adjustment panel (this is the Snapshots tab) and then click the little New icon in the bottom of the panel. We'll name the Snapshot "Sky" and then click OK. Next, we will process the image a second time, starting with default settings and then adjusting the sliders to make Karen and the trees look good. Once again, we will create a Snapshot of these settings, naming the Snapshot "Trees/Karen." Now, we have two versions of the image: one version where the sky looks good and another version where the trees and Karen look good.

Open Images as Photoshop Layers Now we need to open the two versions of the image as layers in a single Photoshop document. With the "Trees/Karen" version/snapshot active, we'll hold down the Shift key so the "Open Image" button turns into the "Open Object" button. We'll click that "Open Object" button to open the image as a Smart Object layer in Photoshop. (If you're using Lightroom, you would go to the main menu and choose Photo > Edit In > Open as Smart Object in Photoshop.)

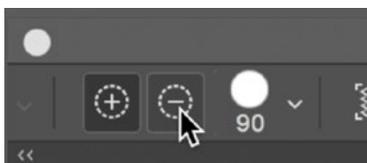
Next, we have to get the other version of the image as a second layer in this Photoshop document. To do that, we'll go to the main menu and choose Layer > Smart Objects > New Smart Object via Copy. This will duplicate the Smart Object layer in such a way that it will be independent of the original. This means that we can make changes to it without affecting the original Smart Object. We'll double-click on the thumbnail image for the new Smart Object layer and it will open back in ACR. We'll go back to the Snapshots tab and load the Sky version and click OK. Now we have two Smart Object layers in one Photoshop document: One where the sky looks good and one where the foreground looks good.

Select and Mask After zooming up on the sky area and viewing it in both layers, it's obvious to me that the transition between the sky and the palm trees looks cleaner in the image that was processed for the sky, so this is the layer that we'll work on. To make a selection of the sky, we'll use the Select and Mask feature, which can be found under the Select menu.

When the Select and Mask window opens, we'll first choose what kind of view we'd like to work with. The View menu is at the top of the Properties panel and you can scroll through them to choose one. In this case, I think the red Overlay mode will work the best. In this mode, the area that is selected will look normal and the area that is not selected will look red.



The View options in the Select and Mask Properties panel.



With the Quick Selection Tool active in the Select and Mask window, you can switch between adding and subtracting from a selection.

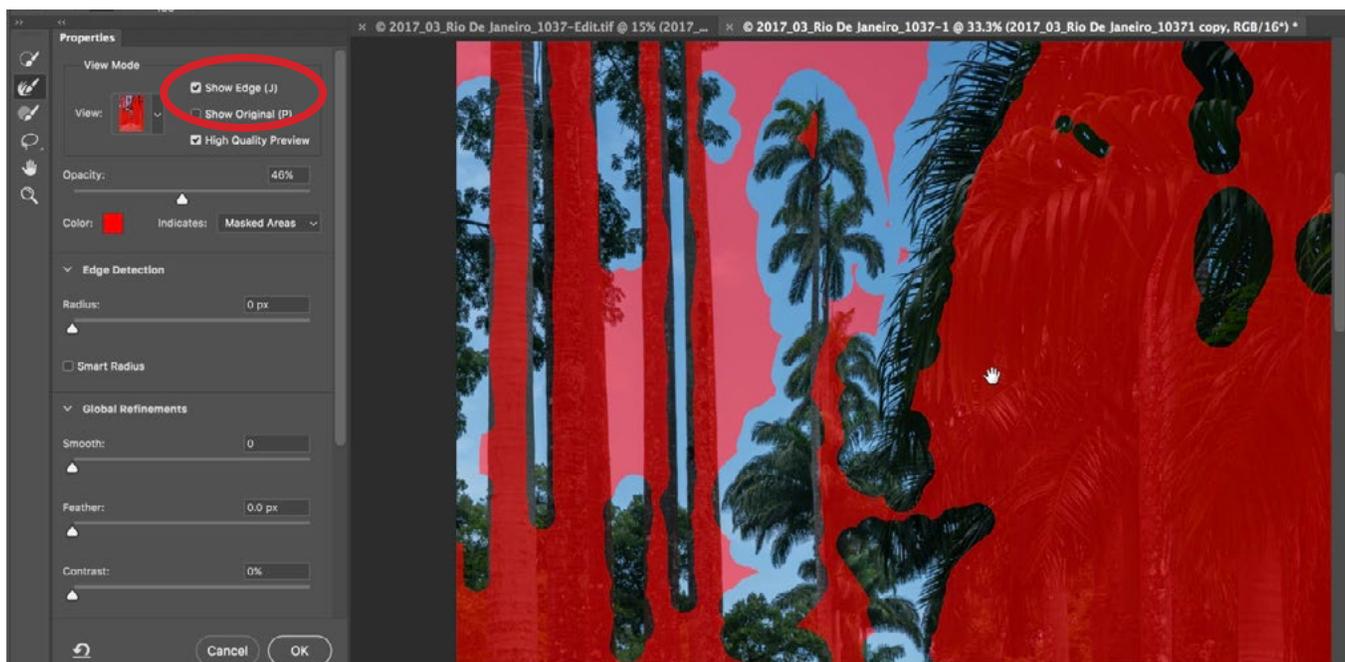
We'll use the Quick Selection Tool, which is at the top of the Tool Bar and should be active by default, to start painting in the area where the sky is. If you accidentally select too much using this tool, you can hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and the cursor will turn into a minus sign (-) indicating that you can use the tool to subtract from the selection. Alternatively, you can change the tool from add to subtract (and vice versa) by clicking the plus and minus icons in the top left corner of the Select and Mask window.

After getting a rough selection of the sky, we'll switch to the next tool down, which is the Refine Edge Brush Tool. This tool will allow you to define areas where you want Photoshop to take control over what is selected and what isn't selected. With this tool, we'll use a larger brush and zoom up on the picture to better see what we're doing. Then, we'll only paint where the blue sky and the trees are mixed together. When I release the mouse button, Photoshop will take control and attempt to select this more complicated edge.



The Refine Edge Brush Tool is being used to paint over the edges where we want to give Photoshop control of the selection. In this case, it's the areas where the trees meet the sky.

To see if we missed any spots of sky, I will turn on the "Show Edge" check box, which will show where we've painted by turning everything else red. The area that's been painted with the Refine Edge Tool is the area where we're giving Photoshop control over what's happening. In this view, we can see if there are any areas where the trees meet the sky where we have not yet painted. There are areas that I missed, so I will continue using the Refine Edge Tool to paint over those areas.

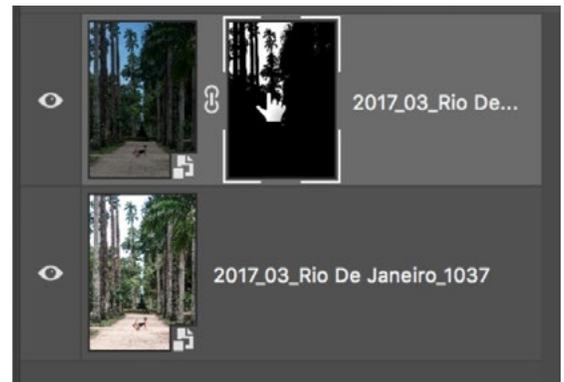


Turning on the Show Edge check box will show us what areas have been painted with the Refine Edge Brush Tool.

To preview the selection we have, I will change the View menu to On Layers, which will treat the unselected area as a mask, hiding that area to reveal what's underneath. Now we can zoom in on the sky and trees to inspect the result. I can see that the transition is not as smooth as it should be, so we will continue to work on the selection later.

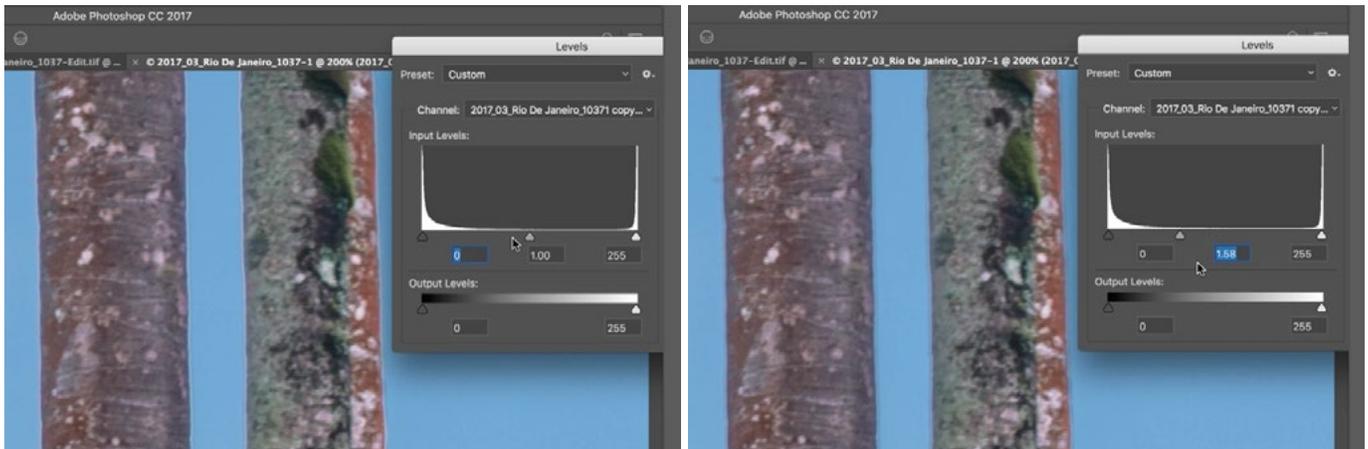
Before leaving the Select and Mask window, I will go to the Output Settings in the Properties panel and specify how the selection should be rendered. I'll choose Selection and then click OK.

Fine-tune the Layer Mask The marching ants selection will appear around the sky area and I will turn the selection into a layer mask by clicking the New Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. Now we'll see if we can get the edge of the selection to look better. When we created the layer mask, the part of the mask that is hiding the layer became completely black and the part of the mask that is revealing the layer became completely white. We want to control that transition from black to white.



The selection was turned into a Layer Mask.

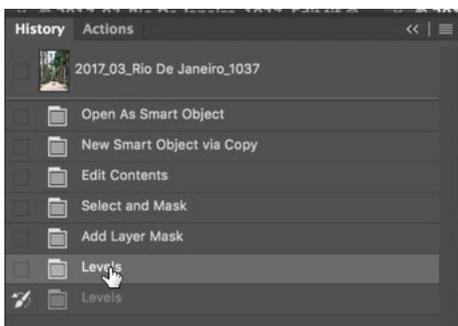
I'll first make sure that the mask is active (the little brackets around the thumbnail indicate that it's active.), I'll zoom in on the sky area of the image and then I'll go to the main menu and choose Image > Adjustments > Levels. In the Levels dialog, there are three main controls beneath the bar chart. The slider on the right will force more areas to white. In a layer mask, white makes things show up, so this slider will make more of the blue sky layer show up. The slider on the left will force more areas to black which, in this case, would hide more of the blue sky area. The middle slider will control the transition from white to black and this slider is going to be the key to improving our mask. I'll move that slider left and right, looking at the effect on the area the trees meet the sky. In this case, dragging the slider to the left creates a much smoother transition. The problem is that one setting makes the tree trunks look optimal and another setting makes the leaves look optimal. Because of this, we'll have to use two different settings. To start, we'll



A Levels adjustment is being made to fine-tune the Layer Mask. The center slider is being used to adjust the transition from black to white. At left, the slider is at its default setting. At right, it has been adjusted to create a smoother transition.

set that center slider in the location that makes the trunks look optimal and then click OK. Now we need to use a different setting for the leaves. I'll go back to the main menu and choose Image > Adjustments > Levels a second time and adjust the center slider so that the leaves look good.

The History Panel & History Brush Of course, while this last adjustment improved the leaves, it made the tree trunks look bad again, so we need to undo the adjustment just in the areas where the tree trunks are. To do this, I'll open the History panel and click the little square to the left of the last history step, which is titled Levels. A little History Brush icon will appear in the square. This means that if we



In the History Panel, we specified what state of the image we would like to paint in with the History Brush and then clicked back one step to revert the image.

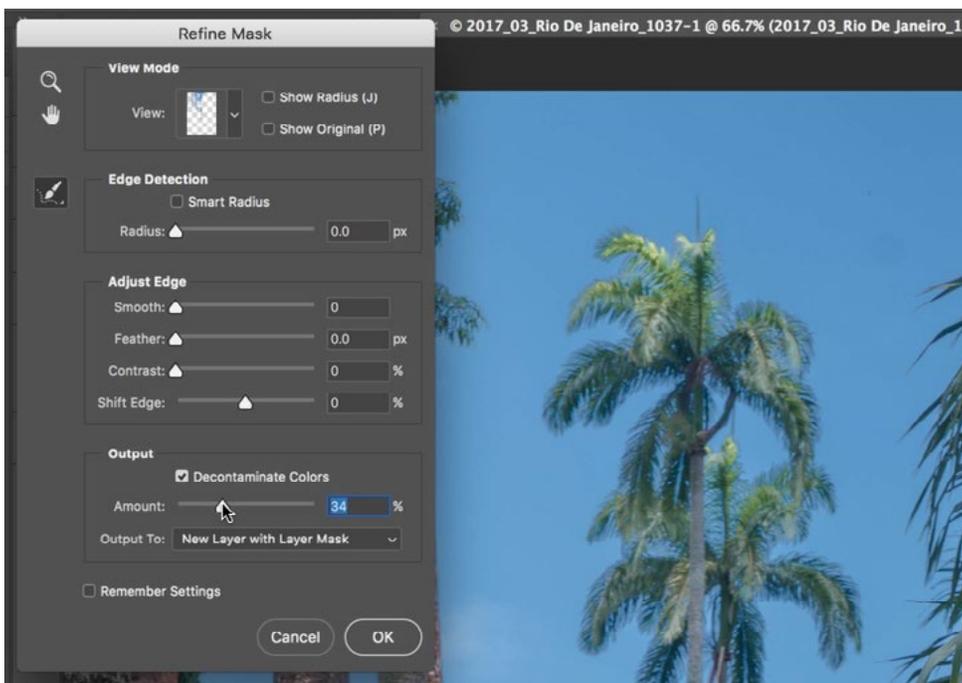
paint with the History Brush, we will paint with what the image looked like at this stage in the document. Now, I will click on the second to last step in the History panel to make it active. This will revert the picture to what it looked like after the first Levels adjustment. Next, we'll activate the History Brush, which can be found in the Tool Bar on the left side of the interface. When we paint with the History Brush, we will be painting in the version of the image that we assigned in the History panel, which is the version of the image after we applied the second

Levels adjustment. Using a soft-edged brush, I will use the History Brush to paint over the leaves of the trees where they meet the sky. After doing this, both the tree trunk areas and the leaf areas should look good.



The History Brush icon

Decontaminate Colors There is another step we can take to improve the mask and make the tree/sky transition look more realistic. Within the Select and Mask dialog (accessed by going to the main menu and choosing Select > Select and Mask), there is a check box within the Properties panel called “Decontaminate Colors.” This setting takes areas that are partially transparent and shifts the color to get a better mix of the layer you’re working on and the layer underneath. The problem with this setting is that it doesn’t do a great job with trees and it doesn’t have an Amount slider to specify the strength of the setting. There is a trick to accessing an Amount slider, however, and that is by accessing the old Refine Mask dialog, which was standard in older versions of Photoshop and was replaced by the Select and Mask feature. To access this older feature, hold down the Shift key while choosing Select and Mask from the Select menu. When the Refine Edge dialog appears, you will see the Decontaminate Colors check box as well as an Amount slider beneath it.



We accessed the Refine Mask feature by holding down the Shift key while choosing Select and Mask from the Select menu. Here, we are adjusting the Decontaminate Colors slider in order to create a smoother transition.

I will move the Amount slider all the way to the left and then gradually move it to the right again while looking at the effect on the image. Using a more subtle setting is what will ultimately provide the best blending results here.

Recap To sum things up, we started by processing the image twice (once for the sky and once for the trees and Karen) and then bringing those two versions as separate Smart Object layers in a single Photoshop document. To blend the two images together, we started with Select and Mask in order to get the best selection possible. Then we turned that selection into a layer mask and adjusted it using Levels. To fine-tune the edge and apply different Levels settings, we used the History panel and the History Brush.